Death and burial in the Mycenaean world

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Our views of the 'Mycenaean world' tend to be dominated by such monuments as the Lion Gate or the 'Mask of Agamemnon'. Yannis Galanakis points out that our knowledge of the formation and development of Mycenaean societies actually comes from the way in which people were buried and explores what exactly the Late Bronze Age tombs (c. 1700—1100 B.C.) and the objects found in them can tell us.

Getting beyond the romance of the distant past

Our images of the medieval world tend to be dominated by knights in armour, great monastery or cathedral buildings, or the life of the royal court, rather than by the hard labour of the peasant. Just so our images of the 'Mycenaean world' tend to be dominated by gold death-masks, such as the 'Mask of Agamemnon', by the characters of myths about the Trojan War, by the curiosity of the Linear B script used for writing records in an early form of Greek, and by engineering marvels, such as the magnificent vaulted tombs (as seen below) and massive 'cyclopean' walls. Yet the heroes of the Trojan War who feature in the Homeric poems are, like Arthur and his round table, products of a literary tradition written down long after the age in which they are supposed to have lived. The extraordinary buildings and bureaucracy of the palaces was no more typical of the Late Bronze Age world than palace life was enjoyed by all in the middle ages.

Much better evidence for life in the Aegean during the Late Bronze Age comes from the thousands of tombs and burials uncovered over the last 150 years. And not the least important thing that these burials reveal is that the 'Mycenaean world' is not at all uniform. We are not dealing with a single 'Mycenaean world' but with several interlocking 'small worlds' covering most of the areas of modern Greece and parts of western Turkey.

From diversity to shared culture

During the Middle Bronze Age (c. 2100–1700 B.C.) tombs in mainland Greece were simple: small rock-cut pits or cists adequate for burying a body, often in a crouched position, and accompanied (if at all) with a few objects: a clay pot or a couple of beads. These tombs were often found in clusters forming 'cemeteries'. In some regions they were incorporated in more demarcated structures, such as earthen and stone mounds. At the end of the Middle Bronze Age (1700–1600 B.C.) systematic investment in monumental tombs begins to be observable. As well as investment in architecture, there is an increased investment in the burial ritual itself and in the objects placed in the graves. Whether or not this investment reflects the empowerment of rising local elites across the Aegean, the competition between and within regions transformed the landscape of mainland Greece forever.

It is the increasingly intense interaction between the regions around the Aegean that marks out the world of the later Bronze Age from earlier Greek prehistory. Perhaps triggered by political and social developments on the island of Crete, the wealthy elites in the different regions started to compete with each other and copy each other's material wealth. This competition and emulation produced a distinctive material culture, the culture that we call 'Mycenaean', whose artistic styles, social practices, and technologies gradually drove out all other regional elements. After the collapse of the Cretan palaces, these regional centres became dominant across the Aegean by 1400–1300 B.C. and 'Mycenaean material culture' became a trademark of the mainland administrative system and its spheres of political and economic influence.

How tombs help us to understand changes in social structure

The Mycenaean palaces belong to the end of this process, but our knowledge of how competition and emulation got started depends largely on tombs and burials. Tombs and burials shed light on the development of social organization and its impact on the formation of the Mycenaean-style administration.

At the end of the Middle Bronze Age and at the dawn of the Late Bronze Age – also known as the 'shaft graves' period (1700–1500 B.C.) – tombs became larger and more complex in their design. Larger tombs allowed for more burials to take place in the same grave, for more elaborate rituals to develop, and for more objects to be placed alongside the dead. But what caused tombs to be made larger? One intriguing idea is that tombs were made larger so that they could be reused over a number of generations. If this is true it in turn may suggest an interest in highlighting group identity, whether as part of a family/kin group or as part of some other social formation.

'Shaft graves' were very large pits with a rock-cut shaft leading to a rather large and more carefully built 'cist' (i.e. stone box) grave. Ledges were left on either side of the cist for stone slabs or wooden beams to be placed in order to cover the tomb over. 'Shaft graves' are attested in various regions of the southern Aegean, but the largest and most impressive concentration of monumental tombs of this kind is at Mycenae itself. It is the excavation of the Mycenae 'shaft graves' that yielded some of the most scintillating finds known to date – including the famous gold death-masks now on display in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

Together with the larger tombs went a change of ritual. Until now, dead bodies had been buried in a crouched or foetal position. Now the dead were lowered into the grave in an extended position, fully clothed and surrounded by objects. Simpler graves (pits and cists) continue to be found during this period. Differences in tomb architecture, in funeral rituals and in the quantity, quality, and diversity of the deposited objects probably reflect changes in social structure in mainland Greece that may have paved the way for the 'Mycenaean palaces'.

Managing multiple burials in a single tomb

During the 'shaft graves' period other new types of tomb also appear, in particular the first built tholos ('beehive') and rock-cut chamber tombs make their appearance. These tomb types share a tripartite layout: the *dromos* (passageway), the *stomion* (entranceway) and the *thalamos* (chamber). Both types provided a monumental shelter for the individual graves within them, and the dead bodies were variously placed on the chamber floor or in pits and cists. In certain tombs, niches or pits in the *dromos* and the *stomion* were also used for burials, or to hold the bones of earlier interments.

Inside the chambers of these tombs, which were used for many burials (in some Aegean regions we find more than ten burials per tomb on average), bones are often found in heaps. Those who reused these tombs necessarily had to come into contact with and handle the skeletons of bodies buried earlier. Starting with the reopening of the tomb, strong sensory experiences would have accompanied all those taking part, including the sight of the transformed remains of the deceased. Not surprisingly, the reuse of the tombs appears to have led to the development of new rituals.

Excavating attitudes

Although both sexes and all age groups are represented among the skeletons found in Mycenaean graves, and could potentially be the recipients of careful rituals and elaborate furnishings, women are under-represented (many more male burials than female burials are found even though men and women must have been more or less equally represented in the living population). Infants, whose deaths must have been frequent given the high infant mortality rate of such societies, are also under-represented and may have been placed elsewhere than in these tombs.

Linear B tablets and major public works show that regional centres controlled a large workforce but, judging by the grave goods, such people are also 'invisible' in the funerary record. These different attitudes to burial of different sorts of people represent attitudes to how particular groups should be buried. Despite some similarities in burial practice, certain attitudes to burial were specific to certain regions and time periods, and also to the social agendas and circumstances of the different communities across the Aegean.

Monumental tombs

Tholos and chamber tombs are some of the most impressive structures surviving from the 'Mycenaean world'. The largest chambers of rock-cut tombs occupy an area of 80 sqm, while the chambers of the largest built tholoi, such as the 'Treasury of Atreus' at Mycenae and the 'Treasury of Minyas' at Orchomenos, have an area of greater than 160 sqm. These tombs took many months, if not years, to complete – their construction will have turned into a spectacle for the local population long before the first interment could even take place.

Around 250 tholoi of varying sizes are known from the Late Bronze Age Aegean. Because of their monumental features and relative rarity, they are often imagined to have been the tombs of a 'king', 'prince', or the like. But it may be wrong to equate tholos tombs with 'big men', 'kings' and 'royalty' and rock-cut chamber tombs with the burial ground of 'commoners'. In certain regions and time periods, crudely-built and poorly-furnished tholoi may have been used as alternatives to other forms of burial, either following local practices or the geology of the region (e.g. if the local conditions were not suitable for cutting rock-cut tombs).

Chamber tombs are more numerous than tholoi, with c. 2200 examples known to date. They range from very small to spectacularly elaborate, with painted or carved façades, chambers equipped with rock-cut gabled roofs and benches, and even side rooms. Those who constructed chamber tombs and performed the funerals in which the dead were placed in them seem to have been concerned to distinguish their funerary structures by their size and elaboration, their placement in the landscape, the furnishing of the burials, and the associated rituals such as the way in which the deceased is placed inside the grave (or the handling of earlier burials when the tomb is prepared for a new burial).

Tholoi are either found in isolation or in clusters of two, three, or four; chamber tombs often form part of extensive cemeteries, with numbers ranging from just a few to more than 250 examples per site. How tombs were clustered in the cemetery, and who was eligible for burial in a particular tomb, may have been dictated by family relations or social groupings rather than simply by status and rank.

Burials and social and political change

During the 'palace period' (1400–1200 B.C.), tomb architecture and burial rituals become standardized over a wide area. At the same time, a sharp drop occurs in the number of new monumental tombs constructed and in the quantity, quality, and diversity of the objects deposited with new burials. This happens first in the main administrative centres and then spreads all across the Aegean. Such 'standardization' and 'impoverishment' may be a side-effect of a new elite etiquette, and the result of the consolidation of power around the main regional administrative centres and their spheres of influence. The focus of competition appears to have shifted away from tombs and burials to the world of the 'palaces' during this period. The demise of the palaces witnessed a turn to regionally specific burial practices.

Tales from the dead

Few images of burials and associated rituals survive – just some scenes of placing the body in a coffin or bier, as in the case of the Tanagra *larnakes* (coffins) and some pots with representations on them. But specialist archaeologists can now recover detailed data that enables them to tell the stories of the people who prepared the burials, the people placed in the graves, and of the graves themselves over their long period of use. Specialists in the study of human bones can deduce information about life-expectancy, health and disease, and population genetics. The dead still tell tales – but it remains up to us to ask the questions and develop new interpretative frameworks for understanding the available data.

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